THE FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT

When You Pray, Say...
Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done

March 8, 1998
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We are taught by Christ to pray "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done..." Inherent in this short petition are the most powerful expectations which have motivated disciples from the first century to the present. And inherent in this short petition are perhaps the most controversial, difficult questions facing anyone who attempts to follow in his or her own time what Jesus taught.... It means that we renew our confidence that the future ultimately belongs to God who intervenes in the affairs of men and women, reordering them according to his purposes. It means that we make a commitment to align ourselves with those purposes and to share in their unfolding.

David Willis
Daring Prayer

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WHEN YOU PRAY, SAY...
YOUR KINGDOM COME, YOUR WILL BE DONE

Isaiah 9:1-7; Matthew 4:12-25

"Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom." Matthew 4:23

Merciful God, our worship of you, our thinking of you, our praying, is always on the run, squeezed between other events in our busy lives. And even now, in this hour, we think about what we must do and accomplish later today and tomorrow and next week. So now, in this moment, be present to us. Slow us down and make us accessible to love and joy and grace, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

* * *

One of the biggest mistakes ministers make is surprising the congregation by changing something in worship without proper warning and explanation. We know that congregations are ordinarily willing to cut us a little slack and indulge our need to rearrange things every now and then. But there is a definite limit to this indulgence. We know that only the brave or very foolish start fiddling with precious holiday customs. We know that you are not entirely happy with the new words that crop up in hymns, intending to reflect more faithfully what we believe: we know that when it comes to your favorites, you're probably not going to change; that no matter how eloquent our literary and theological rationale, many of you will probably not sing "God of our Parents," at least as lustily as you can belt out "God of our Fathers."

All this is to ease you into the fact that I've changed the words to the Lord's Prayer this morning, not very much, but the revision which appears in the bulletin and which you will be invited to pray later is the new translation and it does, in fact, reflect more accurately the meaning of what Jesus said. And it does correspond a little more meaningfully to the sermons I'm preaching and my thought was that we'd try it and see how it feels.

I'm saying all this because almost as a warning, someone put in my mailbox last Monday a copy of the British newspaper, *The Weekly Telegraph,* with an article which announced *"Bishop Fights for Lord's Prayer."*

> "A campaign to defend the Lord's Prayer against modern language versions is to be launched this week. The Bishop of Norwich, the Rt. Rev. Peter Nott, will lead an action to preserve the prayer most Anglicans know by heart as the sole version in the new service book."

That news item prompted the *Tribune* to call around town to see if any of us were fighting over the Lord's Prayer. The writer was interested in the fact that we were going to use the new version this very week and that fact put us on the front page which means that it must have been a pretty slow day down at the *Tribune*.

> **Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.**

I'm sure God will not mind and will hear your prayer in whatever form you offer it. So I invite you to steel yourself, take a deep breath, and have a go at it.

The Lord's Prayer: the prayer Jesus taught his disciples: the prayer we learned as children: the prayer we pray or say at least weekly, oftentimes daily: the prayer that contains a compendium of Christian faith and does, in fact, startle us with its very first word – "Father," its bold invitation to address God intimately in words which invoke our earliest and dearest relationship – our mothers – our fathers. And then, "Hallowed be your name": holy, other, sacred, mysterious – God intimately present but also beyond our ability to think or imagine: God of the galaxies, God of beginnings and endings, God of all time and space.

And then, "Your kingdom come – your will be done."

What images come to your mind with the idea of the kingdom of God?

Roberta Bondi, professor of Church History at Candler School of Theology, Emory University, remembers summer vacation trips when she was a child to visit family in Kentucky. She recalls sitting in the back seat of the car reading the messages on the sides and roofs of barns:

> "The Kingdom is Coming."
> "Prepare to Meet Thy God."
> "Are You Ready to Give Your Answer Before the Judgement Seat?"

At the age of nine, she was pretty sure she wasn't. What she was sure of was that God's kingdom was something about which to worry. She was, she says, terrified of God, God's will, God's kingdom.

She has written a fine essay on the subject of God's kingdom and God's will because her best friend in the world, Melissa, is very sick. Melissa has been a life-long friend; they were looking forward to being "old ladies" together. And now, she is trying to let go of all that and she finds herself praying, almost with every breath.... "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." She reflects:

> "I need to remind myself continually that what God wills for Melissa, for me with her, for everyone, is life in the kingdom, restored life, life not governed by pain and death..."
>
> "I don't think any of us comprehend that as Jesus, Paul and the Book of Revelation announced it, before anything else, the promised kingdom of God was meant to be good news." [See *Weavings*, March/April 1998, *"Your Kingdom Come, Your Will Be Done."*]

Professor Bondi knows what we have all experienced, namely, that any mention of God's will seems inevitably to bring with it our need to blame God for whatever happens to us. God's will, we sometimes seem to believe, is the reason behind loss of job, divorce, sickness, tragic accident, death itself. "It's God's will" we say. "Why did God do this to me?" "Why did God allow this?" "Accept it" we sometimes try to say to one another as we look for something to say about the bewildering pain of grief." "Accept it – it's God's will."

But God's will is that we have life and wholeness and health. God does not will suffering and sickness and death. "Jesus went through Galilee, teaching in the synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people."

"Good news of the kingdom...."

Everyone in Israel waited for and expected the kingdom of God. Everyone knew what it would be like when it came.

Some of the ancient hopes are lovely and timeless:

"A child will be born, a son given. His authority shall grow continually and there shall be endless peace." Isaiah 9:6, 7

"The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid..." Isaiah 11:6

"The wilderness shall rejoice and blossom, the eyes of the blind shall be opened, the lame shall leap like a deer." Isaiah 35:5, 6

Other images have social/ethical implications:

"Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream." Amos 5:24

Everyone had a favorite notion of what the kingdom will look like. The Pharisees' version was of a nation morally and spiritually renewed by strict adherence to the law, to Torah. God's kingdom comes when the law is obeyed and the customs upheld and the temple festivals observed.

The Zealots' version was different. God's kingdom will come as Isaiah promised when God's Anointed One appears in Israel and reestablishes the monarchy, the throne of David, and reigns over the people and the land. That's the political model of the kingdom, the one easiest to understand, the one that inspires and stirs the blood. In Jesus' day, it means doing whatever it takes to drive out the Romans. It means an underground, a guerilla movement.

Jesus was in constant trouble with both groups because he rejected both ideas of the kingdom.

He proclaimed the good news of the kingdom. He told stories about what it was like, how God's kingdom actually appears when God's will is done on earth. For Jesus, God's kingdom is not a place, not an earthly realm. It is a condition. That's fundamental. Jesus rejected the idea that God's kingdom can be coerced by political authority and military might. It has been a lesson his followers have not wanted to learn, from the early Holy Roman Empire to the Crusades, to the Christian Coalition's attempt to establish and enforce by law a Christian America. Jesus would have none of it.

John Dominic Crossan, DePaul's distinguished New Testament scholar, says that according to Jesus the kingdom of God is not a place - but "people under divine rule....The kingdom of God is what the world would be if God were directly and immediately in charge." [*Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 55]

In God's kingdom, sickness is healed. Could we not say, therefore, that when sickness is healed, health is restored, healing happens, the kingdom of God has appeared among us and for a moment in time – God rules.

Crossan points out "the startling conjunction between children and the divine kingdom." Children were nobodies in the ancient world, non-persons. Parental authority was so absolute in the ancient world that unwanted infants, for whatever reason, were simply abandoned. The practice was common. Jesus never said anything more revolutionary than "whoever does not receive the kingdom as a little child will never enter it." (Matthew 10:36) And when he touched the babies, took them in his arms, blessed them, laid hands on them – to the astonishment and consternation of his own disciples – he was challenging the establishment, the political and social order at its very heart.

So could we not say that when, in our world, the children are blessed and held and protected – by giving them schools and healthcare, and day care, and protection from violence and guns and drugs – that God's

kingdom is appearing in our midst, and that those who work for the health and education and protection of the children are doing God's will?

"It is like a banquet," Jesus said, to which all are invited, and all – from the streets and highways come to recline at table, to share bread and wine. The startling thing about it, that great banquet of Jesus, Crossan points out, is its stunning inclusivity. It mixes up all sorts of people.

> "One could have sexes, classes, and ranks all mixed up together. Anyone could be reclining next to anyone else, female next to male, free next to slave, socially high next to socially low, ritually pure next to ritually impure."

What a social nightmare!

When he talked about this radical inclusivity of the kingdom of God, and then dared actually to do it, to eat with women, sinners, poor people, riff-raff, morally suspect, unclean religiously, it not only scandalized the upholders of public morality and orthodox religion and political order, it threatened their very being.

It is no coincidence that in the great conflict in the churches today we find ourselves arguing about exclusivity and inclusivity, about the purity of the church versus its unity. And it is no small tragedy that in the middle of this dispute the idea of inclusivity is held up for ridicule as if it were only political correctness and not a human attempt to express in the life of the institution that dares to claim his name something of the radical inclusivity and grace and acceptance and unconditional love of Jesus Christ. And it is no small tragedy that we Presbyterians are in the process of distinguishing ourselves – not by who we are bold to include – but who we exclude in his name.

The kingdom of God is like a banquet at which all sorts of human beings sit together. So, could we not conclude that when it happens, when the church, for a moment, rises above its captivity to economic and social class, race, even gender, or sexual orientation exclusivism, and opens its arms and invites in and embraces all of Gods children, regardless of who they are, and what sins they have committed and rules broken and social convictions abridged – that God's beautiful, inclusive kingdom appears in our midst.

Roberta Bondi captures an experience which is unfortunately too common, namely, fear of the kingdom, dread of God's coming, the kingdom of God as bad news. The only fear Jesus has for us about the kingdom is that we'll miss it. We'll fail to see it when it appears. We'll neglect to hurry to get into the action, to be part of it. So he keeps saying it will come in secret, it will be a surprise, it will appear in unlikely places.

It is the bold, maybe even outrageous affirmation of our faith that God is actively present in our world and that on occasion, God's kingdom comes into our midst, just frequently enough, I believe, to assure us that it is there, that God is alive and among us, that ultimately things are in God's hands no matter what it feels like now.

It comes, I believe, when the church is courageous, and willing to risk being as radically inclusive, as welcoming to all of God's children, as he was.

The kingdom comes on earth as in heaven when the children are blessed, and affirmed and protected and loved and sacrificed for.

The kingdom comes when peace happens. In Stephen Ambrose's gripping *Citizen Soldiers*, American armies find themselves in Germany, with victory near, on Easter Sunday, 1945.

Sgt. Oakely Honey recalls that as they left the house they slept in,

> "the old lady was handing something to each guy as they left. As I got to the woman I could see tears in her eyes as she placed a decorated Easter egg in my hand." [p. 444-5]

The kingdom comes when people reach across the barriers and boundaries which separate and sometimes alienate. A picture of the kingdom I will always treasure happened here, two weeks ago, at Bill Golderer's installation, during Communion. Bill had invited William P. Thompson, the long time and very distinguished Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church to participate. Bill Golderer had worked with the Interfaith Alliance in Washington which Bill Thompson helped to establish. Mr. Thompson, for many of us, will always be the very essence of a Presbyterian: a very distinguished attorney, strong, eloquent, dignified. He is retired now. And during Communion he was helping serve the bread. At the end of the line was a family I had never seen before – a mother and three children, African-American. When it came time for the smallest boy to receive the bread, he was having a little trouble and so Bill Thompson – 75 – bent down, eye to eye with the 5 year-old and fed him the bread.... and I think the kingdom of God was here for a moment.

And on any night of the week when a youngster jumps off the bus out on Delaware and sees his tutor and they exchange a high five and a hug ... city kid from Cabrini and busy young Harvard law attorney ... and then head in to learn some math – the kingdom of God appears.

And when, in the grip of whatever is oppressing us and hemming us in and diminishing us and scaring us to death – illness, aging, anxiety, insecurity, fear of the future, alienation, grief, fear of our own death, when in the midst of it, somehow God's love breaks through – we live for a moment in that promised kingdom.

To pray "your kingdom come, your will be done" is an act of hope. It is to claim the basic promise of God, that no matter what happens in the life of the world, God is ultimately in charge and God's will ultimately will be done.

It is to claim for our own and to live in the promise that nothing shall ever separate us from God's love in Jesus Christ – no matter what the future brings, no matter what happens to us – we belong to God and we are ultimately and finally safe in God's love.

Or, as Julian of Norwich put it so many centuries ago,

> "All shall be well. And all shall be well. And all manner of thing shall be well."

"Your Kingdom come. Your will be done. On earth as it is in heaven."

Amen.